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From: Seneca, Roy
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Subject: Another new Charleston Gazette article - Extent of Freedom site contamination still unknown

Extent of Freedom site contamination still unknown

By Ken Ward Jr.

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Federal investigators remain unsure how much chemical contamination there is in the soil and groundwater at the Freedom Industries' tank farm that spilled thousands of gallons of toxic chemicals in the region's Elk River drinking water supply.

So far, state and federal government agencies have provided the public with few details about the long-term plans for cleaning up the site, which is just 1.5 miles upstream from the West Virginia American Water intake.

Officials have also not provided even a description of the process for how that long-term plan will be developed -- or how members of the public can learn the details of it and provide any input.

"I know they are working on the plan right now," said Fran Burns, remedial project manager for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's regional office in Philadelphia.

EPA officials made Burns available for an interview to answer Gazette questions about the extent of contamination at the site, what has been done to control any additional runoff, and long-term prospects for remediation of the tank farm.

The state Department of Environmental Protection has not responded to requests for an interview or briefing to address those same issues.

Burns said that EPA believes that cleanup crews -- from a contractor hired by Freedom Industries -- have taken adequate steps to avoid further pollution from the site reaching the Elk River.

"As far as the extent of contamination of the spill, the work that has been going on at the site has

contained anything that spilled," Burns said.

"Since the initial response, the material has been collected that could move off the site," Burns said. "There are a series of things in place, there are sumps, there is an interceptor trench, pumping the water that they collect in the trench. There have been booms set up in the river so that any material that would escape from the trench or off site is collected by the booms."

Burns said that some of the material from the Crude MCHM tank that leaked reached the river from surface runoff and some from underground leaching.

"We suspect that some of both happened," Burns said. We don't know how much of it is subsurface. It could be a little. It could be a lot.

"There are things in place now to control anything that may be remaining on the site," Burns said. "It's very hard to say what may be left at this point."

Burns said that water and any contaminants that end up in the interceptor trench are being stored on site or transported to Freedom's Poca Blending facility in Nitro.

During Tuesday's interview, Burns said he was not aware of any problems with the storage of those materials at the Poca Blending site.

"I'd have to get back to you," Burns said. "I'm not sure of any of the details of the secondary containment at the Poca facility."

The week after the Elk River spill, the DEP cited Freedom Industries for a broad variety of violations after an inspection of the Poca Blending site. The DEP issued five notices of violation, or NOVs, alleging improper storage of materials that could contaminate groundwater, failure to follow a DEP-issued stormwater permit, failure to provide required pollution discharge monitoring reports.

After the Burns interview, EPA spokeswoman Bonnie Smith said in an e-mail that her agency "is aware of the enforcement actions DEP has taken at the Nitro site. EPA has visited the Poca facility to investigate staging operations of the MCHM-contaminated water."

In a statement issued Tuesday, the DEP promised it would "closely monitor" the situation as Freedom Industries moves chemicals from the from its Nitro facility to a "coal facility" in Pennsylvania. But, DEP warned the process could create more of the licorice-like odors that have become common since the spill.

"During the moving of materials, there is a potential for area residents to detect odors," the DEP statement said. "The WVDEP will closely monitor the activity to ensure that it is done safely and with as minimal of an odor impact as possible."

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